

Regional

Diversity more than a black and white issue

For a long time the issue of diversity in society has been a hotly debated but not always clearly understood subject. From issues of race and gender, we have now moved to a much-expanded discussion that includes culture, national origin, sexual orientation and disability. To discuss these and other topics, we talked to a group of experts, all of them faculty members at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. They were: Saba Fatima, an expert on critical theories of race and a native of Karachi, Pakistan and who lived in Saudi Arabia for 10 years; Prince Wells, an expert on African-American music and director of the black studies program; Isaac Blankson, a native of Ghana who lived for several years in Norway; Florence Maätita, an expert on race and ethnic relations; Abdullatif Hamad, a native of the West Bank, Palestine, and Helena Gurfinkel, a native of Moscow, Russia, and who graduated from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Fatima spoke of her experiences in two different Islamic countries.

"My childhood in Saudi Arabia was great and when I was about 10 we moved back to Pakistan," she said. "I hated it. But now as an adult, I just went back to Saudi Arabia last March for a pilgrimage, and now looking back I feel bad for my mom. I could not imagine living in a country where she couldn't drive, or she couldn't go out by herself, or she couldn't take care of us in case of an emergency. I'm hoping things are changing in Saudi Arabia, but from my experience last March it didn't seem like it. Pakistan, on the other hand, is very open for women. You can dress as you want, do what you want. You can have the jobs and careers that you wish for, but there are different sorts of discrimination in Pakistan. There is discrimination according to what sect of Islam you belong to." On the subject of religions, Wells talked about the differences between black and white churches of the same denomination here in the United States.

"It has to do with the separation of cultures and with slavery," he said. "When I look at music I always say that music is tied to a culture, and African American music is really tied to African American culture. Religions have evolved that way, as well. Within certain denominations you can have black practices and white practices. Most



Picture caption: (clockwise) Dr. Fatima, Prof. Wells, Dr. Blankson, Dr. Romero, Dr. Maätita, Dr. Hamad, and Dr. Gurfinkel. Picture by Michael Nathe.

things in this country have evolved around racial lines. America has immigrants from all over the world. I think we still have a long way to go in establishing a real identity that is not based on things like race because you can't build a culture based on that." On the topic of immigration, Blankson spoke of his own experiences.

"For a long time when I was checking boxes where you would have African American, Caucasian, Hispanic, and all that, I always asked myself where I belonged," he said. "So I learned to check 'other' until

they added 'black/African American' and I felt I had a category. Regarding the question of whether I am an African American, I am reminded by some friends that say I am still not African American because their experiences are different from mine. And that seems to be a good argument, but then when you are looking at where you are at a particular point of time and whether you can claim to be a member of that group, that's a different question. Now I have everything to be an African American in terms of what the system asks, but do I qualify to

be a true African American? I don't know. I would probably argue that I am. Because I'm African and I'm American." In terms of multiracial experiences, Maätita also had something to say.

"It wasn't until 2000 when we were filling out the census forms that you could check more than one box," she explained. "There are some people who align themselves more with one parent than the other depending on the environment or culture in which they live. I grew up in Los Angeles and my mother is Mexican, so I feel like I do have a

Aldemaro Romero Jr. College Talk

much stronger connection with my Mexican heritage than I do to my Indonesian heritage. So there are some folks who develop their identities around that type of affiliation. And this shows a bit of problem in that how we view race is very structured and rigid, but what happens when you can't make that choice?"

Much of culture is determined by religion. And for Muslims in this country, things have changed since 9/11.

"Personally I did not feel a difference before or after, especially within academia. However, in the streets Muslim women usually face more issues in this relation because they can be easily distinguished as Muslims," explained Hamda. "A Muslim woman, whether she is Arab, Pakistani, Indian, or Indonesian has a veil on her head, which is when they encounter some problems. Only for a couple years after 9/11 were there a lot of problems, with Muslim women particularly. Mosques and centers were burned around the country. Unfortunately, some people react with no rationale about certain incidents and they just blame everybody that is that race, ethnicity, or religion." Israel, it seems, is a nation united by religion. According to Gurfinkel, this is not necessarily the case.

"It's a very complicated issue in terms of recognizing Judaism as sort of a governing force of identity, but then there is also Jewish as ethnicity," said Gurfinkel. "There are people with different non-Jewish backgrounds who have not converted to Judaism living in Israel who are, for example, observant Christians. So now it is sort of a very complicated mesh of legal and cultural issues being worked out. For example, you can buy a Christmas tree now in Israel and you couldn't 20 years ago. It is a big difference in Israel."

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.

Picture courtesy of Michael Nathe